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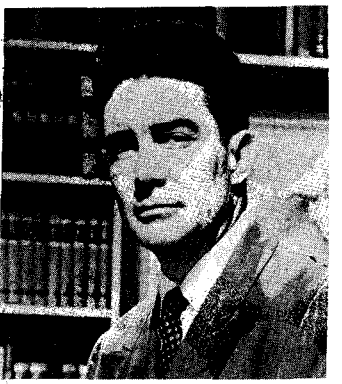

DAN SMOOT

WHY DON'T THEY TELL US THE TRUTH?

"Good God! Why don't they tell us the truth?"

U. S. Representative Melvin Laird (Wisconsin Republican) asked the question. He was upset by administration lies understating, by almost half, the cost of the Vietnam war.[1] That was in June, 1966; and Mr. Laird knew the answer to his question. President Johnson thought it would help his administration politically if the people were deceived about how much the war was costing and about the size of his budget deficit.

Senator John Stennis (a Democrat, who is Chairman of the Armed Services Appropriations Committee) honestly warned that the administration was not budgeting enough money to pay for the astronomical war costs; but administration spokesmen derided and discredited Stennis.[1]

On September 5, 1966, Representative Richard Poff explained administration lies about Vietnam war costs:

"The defense appropriation bill passed by the [89th] Congress . . . carried a figure of a little more than $58 billion for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1967 . . . .

"In that bill, the Vietnam war . . . is funded approximately $1.5 billion per month. Actually, the monthly cost is almost $2.5 billion. This means . . . the President will have to come back to the Congress early in January [1967] asking for a supplemental appropriation in the neighborhood of $12 billion.

"What is the purpose of this fiscal sleight of hand? Obviously, the purpose is to hold back the money until all the grandiose new domestic spending programs have been funded and then later, after the November elections, appropriate the $12 billion deficiency for the war effort. That way, national defense instead of welfare gets the blame for busting the budget. And then the new tax hike can be peddled as a Victory Tax."[2]

Less than a month after the 1966 elections, Representative Hale Boggs (Louisiana Democrat, one of Johnson's most faithful rubber stamps in Congress) revealed that Vietnam war costs were

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almost double the amounts estimated and budgeted earlier in the year.[3] Administration officials confirmed Boggs' statement — behaving as if they had just made the discovery.

On November 29, 1966 (about the time administration officials were admitting the truth about war costs), President Johnson announced multi-billion dollar reductions in domestic federal spending for the remainder of the fiscal year (which ends June 30, 1967). He said he was "deferring expenditures and postponing expenditures and stretching out expenditures, so that we do not shove them into a period of seven months and continue to put gasoline on this fire [of inflation]."[4]

The President was being less than forthright.

Among the 3 billion dollars of federal spending which the President said would be eliminated in the final 7 months of the 1967 fiscal year was $1.1 billion for interstate highways. Federal spending for highways does not come out of the budget. It comes out of a special trust fund raised by federal retail sales tax on gasoline. No money is supposed to be distributed to states for highway construction until after the money has already been collected in taxes and placed in the fund. Hence, all of the money allocated for highway spending through June 30, 1967, is supposed to be in the trust fund. If it accumulates as an unspent surplus (while highways remain unfinished and costs steadily rise), the government will cause further economic dislocations and inflate the cost of highway building when it unleashes the piled-up surplus of tax money.

Johnson's touted cut-back in spending is a hoax. The aim is not to reduce federal spending, but to defer some of it — "by shoving most of it into fiscal 1968," as one federal official explained.[5] Another federal official complacently remarked:

"Nobody gets hurt. Nobody lost anything."[5]

If people complain about reduced federal spending during the 7 months following the 1966 elections, voters can be blamed because they unseated Great-Society legislators. Then, in 1968, Johnson can dump unprecedented sums of tax money into the economy, hoping to buy votes for himself and his party.

Though I dislike the old saying that some people lie "when the truth would serve better" (because it implies that there are occasions when lying is all right), it did come to mind during the December, 1966, furore over the killing of civilians by American bombing in North Vietnam. When communists first claimed that we had killed civilians in Hanoi, Washington categorically denied the claim. Shortly thereafter, Harrison Salisbury (of *The New York Times*) went to Hanoi and reported what he called "proof" that American bombs had killed civilians. The White House then admitted that civilians may have been hit.

The press and governments of the world (particularly in those nations which have received huge amounts of American aid and are generally called our "friends and allies") erupted with indignant condemnations of the United States because the "White House" had lied. Our "friends and allies" express little concern about the loss of American lives in planes shot down over North Vietnam; they seldom criticize communists for indiscriminate killing of South Vietnam civilians and American personnel by terroristic bombings in Saigon.

Why did the "White House" lie? Would it not have been better for President Johnson to tell the simple truth, namely, that the killing of some civilians is an inescapable feature of modern warfare?

He should remind Great Britain and the Soviet Union that the number of civilians our bombs have killed in Vietnam is an infinitesimal fraction of the number of civilians killed by the bombing of cities in World War II. The President should candidly admit to the world that the restrictions he has placed on our air power have made our bombing of North Vietnam much more costly to us (in lives and money) than to North Vietnam. And he should make an honest decision, either to win the war against North Vietnam, or to get

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our men out before any more of them die needlessly.

But simple truth, candor, and honesty seem alien to the White House in our time. Even in relatively trivial matters, Johnson often denies the truth "when the truth would serve better."

For example, Johnson had planned a trip to make political speeches for certain Democrat candidates, just before the 1966 elections. To that end, the White House and the Democrat National Committee had notified Democrat politicians in several states of the exact time when they could expect a presidential visit. Johnson changed his mind about making the trip. When questioned upon his return from his Asian tour, instead of saying honestly that he had altered his plans, he said that the rumors about his intent to make such a political trip were the figment of reporters' imagination.[3]

Deceit in the White House did not, however, originate with Johnson.

There can be no doubt about the accuracy of the statement — attributed several years ago to Clare Boothe Luce — that Franklin D. Roosevelt "lied us into World War II."

Practically everyone knew President Truman would say anything he considered good politics at the moment, regardless of known facts. His calling the exposure of the Alger Hiss espionage case in 1948 a "political red herring" is a case in point.

Eisenhower's administration lied about our U-2 plane shot down over Russia in 1960, and shamefully deceived the public about Castro during the period of Castro's conquest of Cuba.

The Kennedy administration's most notorious lie concerned the Bay of Pigs disaster.

Kennedy refined the practice of deceit into a political art, using it primarily to create a favorable Kennedy image.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., admits that he lied to the press — on orders from President Kennedy —about the administration's responsibility for the Bay of Pigs tragedy in April, 1961. That lie — like the Eisenhower administration's lie about our U-2 plane over Russia — was so palpable that the administration eventually made an apologetic admission. But the Kennedy administration developed a rationale about lying to the public.[6]

In October, 1962, the Kennedy administration was again caught giving out false information about Cuba. This time, there were no apologies. Arthur Sylvester (Kennedy's Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs) defended official falsification of the news as proper "management" and "control," saying that the "generation of news" by officialdom is "part of the weaponry that a President has" in the "solution of political problems" — and that the end of creating, in the minds of the people, the correct attitude about government programs, justifies the means.[7]

The use of deceit to create a favorable Kennedy image is revealed in *Kennedy*, a book by Theodore Sorensen, published in the fall of 1965.

John Kennedy was first elected to the Senate, in 1952, by a very small margin. Therefore, according to Sorensen, Kennedy launched his campaign for re-election in 1958 "the day after his 1952 campaign ended." Each year, he mailed a comprehensive report throughout Massachusetts, telling how he was "doing more" for the state. Concerning the ethics and legality of mailing such a self-serving political document at taxpayers' expense, Theodore Sorensen says:

"We justified . . . [it] on the legislator's historic responsibility to account for his stewardship to his constituents; and when we were unable to find a sufficiently brief quotation from an early American statesman to this effect, Lee White and I invented one and attributed it to 'one of our founding fathers.'"[8]

The most revolting known instance of the use of deceit to promote the Kennedy cause occurred after the assassination. While the President's body was on the airplane at Love Field in Dallas, the Kennedy family and their intimates were engaged in a petty but vicious power struggle with Johnson.[9] On the evening of the assassination, after the President's body had been taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, the Kennedys

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and their inner circle held an all-night conference in the White House, not to mourn the fallen President, but to plan how best to profit from his death. From the January 2, 1967, issue of *U.S. News & World Report*:

"The conclave, according to one informant, was devoted to how to use the funeral, and the grave, 'to build the Kennedy image.' Mrs. Kennedy asked Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to go to the Library of Congress and find the details on how the East Room was arranged when President Lincoln was killed.

"Sargent Shriver . . . and Angier Biddle Duke, then Chief of Protocol for the State Department, 'worked all night planning a European-style funeral.' . . .

"One of President Johnson's associates has said bluntly:

" 'The entire post-assassination series of events has been a calculated, contrived, emotional build-up — not for the sake of paying honest respect to and showing genuine grief for John F. Kennedy — but to enhance the image of the Kennedy family and the Kennedy name.' "(9)

And all the while the Kennedys were putting on a carefully staged show of grief that melted the hearts of millions.

Johnson himself capitalized on the assassination to build a Johnson image. Pretending devotion to the dead President, Johnson played upon the overwrought emotions of the people and of Congress to get a mass of New Frontier Legislation that Kennedy himself could not get — thus creating an image of Johnson as the Great Accomplisher.

The primary characteristic of the campaign against Goldwater in 1964 was a "calculated, contrived, emotional" insinuation that a vote for Goldwater was a vote for violent "right wing extremism," still held responsible for Kennedy's death, although a communist, companion of liberals and associated with liberal causes, had committed the crime.

Oh, for a statesman in the White House!

The goal is not beyond our reach; but in striving for it, we must not neglect the equally important goal of electing constitutional conservatives to Congress. If we had a Congress of constitutionalists, the deceptions and inadequacies of the President could do little substantial harm to the country, because it is the Congress that appropriates our money to pay for what the President does.

1966 BOUND VOLUME

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FOOTNOTES

(1) "Cost of War Understated; Great Deception Exposed," by Richard Wilson, *The Dallas Morning News*, December 13, 1966, p. D18

(2) Newsletter to constituents, by U.S. Rep. Richard Poff, September 5, 1966

(3) "Washington Comes Around to Candor," by Richard Wilson, *The Dallas Morning News*, December 2, 1966, p. A9

(4) "President Orders Cuts in Spending," by Richard M. Morehead, *The Dallas Morning News*, November 30, 1966, p. 1

(5) "8.3 Billion Spending Cut Curb on Inflation," by Sterling F. Green, *The Dallas Times Herald*, December 14, 1966, p. A21

(6) *A Thousand Days*, by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 1965

(7) "Free Press Maintains Confidence of Public," AP story by J. M. Roberts, *The Dallas Morning News*, November 1, 1962, Section 1, p. 8

(8) *Kennedy*, by Theodore C. Sorensen, Harper & Row, New York, 1965, pp. 74-75

(9) "Growing Rift Of LBJ And Kennedys," *U.S. News & World Report*, January 2, 1967, pp. 22-7

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